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ABSTRACT

Little is known concerning the satisfaction of newly admitted graduate students with their program's orientation process. In fact, Pruitt-Logan and Isaac (1995) called graduate students' experience "the great unaddressed academic issue in higher education." Some research has addressed specific aspects of graduate student orientation and retention, like mentoring and expectations. However, little has been done to evaluate the entire orientation experience. Taub and Komives (1998) found that a few components of their orientation program had large standard deviations, meaning that some students really liked or needed a certain component, while to others it was not as useful. Qualitative studies are useful in investigating differences where survey research is useful in identifying broad similarities. Accordingly, this qualitative study interviewed individual first-year students at a large, private university regarding the most salient aspects of their orientation experience. Four broad areas of concern emerged from the nine interviews: immediate concerns, mentorship programs, administrative issues, and the formal orientation meeting. (Author)

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Orientation and Retention of Counseling PhD Students: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Little is known concerning the satisfaction of newly admitted graduate students with their program's orientation process. In fact, Pruitt-Logan & Isaac (1995) called graduate students' experience "the great unaddressed academic issue in higher education"(p.1). Some research has addressed specific aspects of graduate student orientation and retention, like mentoring and expectations (Lark & Croteau, 1998; Anastasia, Tremblay, Makela & Drennan, 1999). However, little has been done to evaluate the entire orientation experience. Taub & Komives (1998) found that a few components of their orientation program had large standard deviations, meaning that some students really liked or needed a certain component, while to others it was not as useful. Qualitative studies are useful in investigating differences where survey research is useful in identifying broad similarities. Accordingly, this qualitative study interviewed individual first-year students at a large, private university regarding the most salient aspects of their orientation experience. Four broad areas of concern emerged from the nine interviews: immediate concerns, mentorship programs, administrative issues, and the formal orientation meeting.

Orientation and Retention of Counseling PhD Students: A Qualitative Study.

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Background

Little is known concerning the satisfaction of newly admitted graduate students with their program's orientation process. In fact, Pruitt-Logan & Isaac (1995) called graduate students' experience "the great unaddressed academic issue in higher education"(p.1). Some research has addressed specific aspects of graduate student orientation and retention, like mentoring and expectations (Lark & Croteau, 1998; Anastasia, Tremblay, Makela & Drennan, 1999). However, little has been done to evaluate the entire orientation experience. Taub & Komives (1998) conducted a study in which newly matriculated graduate students rated the effectiveness and importance of the College Student Personnel (CSP) program at the University of Maryland. The CSP program targets both socialization and administrative needs and covers a pre-acceptance to post-enrollment time period. They found, overall, that the program was extremely helpful, particularly in helping students gain a broad understanding of their program. They also found that a few components of the program had large standard deviations, meaning that some students really liked or needed a certain component, while to others it was not as useful. The reasons for these differences are difficult to identify within survey research; however, qualitative studies are able to investigate differences through interviews and open-ended questioning. Accordingly, this study interviewed individual first-year students at a large, private university regarding the most salient aspects of their orientation experience.

Method

Nine first year graduate students, all in the first semester of a PhD counseling program, were interviewed once for approximately one hour about their impressions of the orientation process. The participants were asked to recall their initial expectations, fears, hopes and possible disappointments from the time they were first contacted by their program until the present. The participants included eight women and one male. Of the women, there was one Asian, two African-Americans, four Caucasian and one Asian/Caucasian participant. The male was Caucasian. The ages ranged from 23 to 35 years old.

Findings

Four broad areas of concern emerged from the nine interviews: immediate concerns, mentorship programs, administrative issues, and the formal orientation meeting. In the following section I will address each concern by providing the viewpoints of those who supported the programs and those who had a disappointing experience, as well as addressing those components which had almost unanimous consensus.

Immediate Concerns

The most cited concern among the participants was funding. Of particular concern was the perceived lack of departmental support in obtaining enough funding to support their schooling at the rather expensive, private university. As one student was told "if you scrape and scrape you might be able to find something. Don't look to the department for help." Another student expressed the similar view that the department did not have

enough funds to support the students and this required the students to look for outside sources. What concerned this particular student the most was the feeling that she would have to do everything on her own, without departmental assistance. Another student expressed her confusion that the scholarship information was not all in one place. Overall, there seemed to be a recognition before acceptance that funding would not be widely available; however, the students who complained about funding did so because of the lack of departmental support in finding alternative financial sources. Four of the students who were concerned about funding seriously considered not attending the graduate program. After the first year, two of these students had dropped out of the program but it is unknown what their primary motivations were for discontinuing.

Two students did not cite funding as a problem for them particularly. One of these students was married to a faculty member in another department and received a tuition reimbursement. The other student expressed that he did not expect a lot of help from the department because he came from a large undergraduate university where "if you want to do anything you have to figure it out yourself."

Another area of general concern for the students was departmental disorganization. Six students reported having difficulty with the acceptance process, including lost applications, receiving inaccurate rejection letters, and knowledge of departmental changes. One of the students reported feeling "devastated" when she found out that the department only had her three letters of recommendation and not her online application. She was able to do a phone interview and the online material was eventually retrieved but was concerned about the communication between the staff and faculty. Another student had a positive interview with a faculty member and then received a

rejection letter. She expressed feeling distressed about receiving the letter and committed to another school. When the chair of the department called her to explain the mistake, she reported feeling anxious because there seemed to be a lot of disorganization in the department. Another student was told over email that he was accepted, went to a new student luncheon and then received a rejection letter. The student reported feeling "paranoid about whether I said something inappropriate at the luncheon." He emailed the department chair, asking why they would give someone the impression that they were accepted and then not accept them and he was informed that it had been mistake. The student reported that it was "horrible to have to tell people I was not accepted after I told them that I was." He made up his mind to attend another university, but because of housing and the prestige of the university he eventually decided to accept the offer of enrollment. Another student expressed felt anxiety when an email was sent around informing the students of departmental changes in the administration and faculty. She was primarily concerned because she had not been formally accepted yet, and was concerned that these changes would nullify her acceptance.

Those students who did not express frustration concerning their acceptance did not have the miscommunication that the other students' experienced.

Mentors

Those students who did not report a positive experience with student or faculty mentors had a few different concerns. One student reported that she was contacted by both a faculty member and a student before being accepted, but because she did not know what kinds of questions to ask she did not find the experience very helpful. When she

asked about funding, she was given the names of a few students who told her that it was really hard to find funding. Once she was in the program, she found that the student mentor helped make the experience normative by explaining departmental problems. Another student found that the most help came from her advisor, and secondarily her student mentor. She found that she received more help from her advisor's other advisees than from her assigned mentor. Another student felt frustrated that her advisor did not seem to know much about the classes offered or which classes were required. This concern was echoed by a few other students who wanted more structure from their advisors concerning what classes to take. One student ended up taking three classes instead of four because of the lack of direction.

Those students who found their faculty mentor helpful reported feeling like the mentor was a "good fit," that the mentor provided "a lot of structure," and felt the mentor "was reaching out." Overall, the faculty were perceived as helpful in deciding what courses to take. And those that had a bad experience said that their advisor did not understand the student or the program very well. The student mentors seemed to be helpful in making the confusion of a new program normative, offering support, and offering concrete help with housing and finances. Those with a negative experience with a student mentor were those who had never been contacted.

Administrative Issues

The two areas of administrative concern seemed to revolve around not having enough information about the program and the university, and having interpersonal difficulties with the staff.

One student expressed frustration about receiving a checklist in the mail of things to do (e.g. get parking permit, library card, etc.) but had no idea how to do them. Another often cited confusion was how to apply for scholarships and how to transfer courses. One student, when trying to transfer courses, sent a credit statement to the school within a week of their asking for it, but then felt that no one knew what to do with the information. Two students in particular had difficulties with the staff during this time of figuring out logistical requirements. As a part of registration, the students had to be pre-approved to take classes. After having difficulties getting the administrative assistant to approve her, one student expressed that it "really made me question whether I wanted to come. Am I going to get this kind of attitude every time?" Another student explained, "I had the perception that when I was asking for help I was being bothersome. If they make it up to you to figure everything out, then they shouldn't make you feel bothersome."

One student who expressed feeling fine about logistical items, like parking, had her roommate, a current student, show her around campus. Another student met with the administrative assistant before classes started and got her parking permit, registration and financial aid taken care of.

Orientation meeting

The general expectations for the orientation meeting included information about what courses to take, research requirements, registering, transferring courses and also getting to know the cohort better. Those who were satisfied with the orientation were those, generally, who viewed it as a social gathering. One student explained that she did not expect concrete information from the orientation and she was satisfied. Another

student expressed feeling that the orientation was more helpful than expected because she was able to hook up with some of the students informally.

Those students who expected logistical information, and information about the program track were generally very unsatisfied with the orientation. The information these students expected included, what courses to take, how to find funding, the sequence of classes, registering for classes and what classes were transferable and how to transfer them. Two students reported that a brief portion of the orientation, when a professor outlined the timeline for academic and clinical requirements, was very helpful and they would have liked even more of the same. One student suggested that it was overwhelming to hear so much about future concerns, like tenure track, and he thought a better orientation would "talk briefly about future things and focus more on what has to be done immediately."

Conclusions

The nine students interviewed came from widely divergent backgrounds with differences in education level, ethnicity, economic support and social support. Some of the differences impacted the perceived usefulness of various orientation components. For example, some students did not find funding to be as great a concern as other students, some students did not have the same social expectations and other students differed in their perceived support of the department in administrative issues. Despite these differences, which are important in understanding why different orientation components may be more effective for some student over others, some general recommendations for orientations can be made.

- Provide clear course requirements and a timeline for required classes.
- Provide support for finding funding in the department is not able to fund all students.
- Reach out to students through mentoring.
    - Faculty mentors should be directive and provide course and research structure.
    - Student mentors should help with financial, housing concerns as well as provide emotional support.
- Provide information about parking, financial aid, library use and other administrative concerns.
    - Perhaps plan a day with an administrative assistant who can directly address these issues PRIOR to beginning classes.
- Offer opportunities for students to gather on a social level.
- Do not overburden students with post graduation concerns. Focus on immediate issues like classes and funding.

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